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ABSTRACT

This study examined the perceptions and concerns of parents of culturally diverse children with disabilities about: their children's performance at home and school; the role of the school in educating their children; and interactions with the educational system. Twelve families, six Anglo and six Hispanic, with children placed in special education classes in a southern New Mexico community, were the subjects. An interviewer conducted 1-hour, unstructured interviews in the homes of the families and provided researchers with the recorded interview, handwritten notes, and oral discussions related to the interview experience. Results of the interview show some differences in understanding, attitudes, and information-seeking behavior with regard to the services provided the children. Both Hispanic and Anglo families had some difficulty interpreting information given to them, felt their children needed more homework, and felt their children at certain identified disability levels were not handicapped or would outgrow their conditions. Only parents with children at a higher disability level gave a medical term to the disability. None could cite a cause for the disability or expressed feelings of guilt. Socioeconomic levels impacted most on those who felt beneficial aids were unaffordable. Implications for future research and programming are outlined. (MSE)

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The Interaction between Families of Culturally Diverse Handicapped Children and the School

Anne Gallegos and Roberto Gallegos

Chinn, Winn, and Walters (1978) wrote that the family is the training place where a child learns how to relate to other people. They noted that parents play a particularly crucial role in development when a child is handicapped. Shea and Bauer (1984) suggested that the reaction of family members to the birth and presence of a handicapped child may affect the personal, social, and intellectual growth of the child, as well as influence familial participation in school/community efforts aimed at addressing the handicap. Baca and Cervantes (1984) described recent studies on families of handicapped children as being predominantly related to reactions expressed by Anglo-American parents. Citing research by Marion and McCaslin (1979), they stated that until recently, it was assumed that all parents of handicapped children experienced similar reactions, including: projection of blame, guilt, denial, sorrow or mourning, withdrawal, and reflection. On the contrary, Marion and McCaslin (1978) suggested that feelings of acceptance and protection of the handicapped child are more common among families who have extended family networks, as is the case within many culturally diverse communities—particularly Mexican American and black. Marion (1982) has reported that several researchers (Billingsly, 1968; Cole, 1967; Hill, 1972) implied that traditional views of parental acceptance have additionally disregarded the role of religion and the feelings of acceptance and security religion creates in the lives of culturally diverse families. Other variables such as socioeconomic status, the severity of the handicap, and parental attitudes

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about childrearing also seem to intersect with culture to create varying perceptions about the status of a disabled child.

The implication that arises from the studies of parental reaction to handicaps is that the feelings of culturally diverse families about their child's handicap have not been adequately addressed in the literature, and that their implications for familial involvement with school and service agencies are relatively unexplored. By law (Public Law 94-142, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act, 1975) and in theory, the purpose of special education is to provide an appropriate education to all handicapped children. Fuchigami (1980) stated that in order to provide an appropriate education to culturally diverse handicapped children, careful consideration must be given to cultural and linguistic influences that might affect student and parent performance in a variety of social and educational situations.

Marion (1982) reported that parents of culturally diverse handicapped children have been dismayed at the overinclusion of their children in special education classes. Although Public Law 94-142 requires that parents be involved in the diagnosis, placement, and treatment of their handicapped children, culturally diverse parents often feel unaware and uninformed about *why* the school has chosen to identify the child as disabled and *how* the system goes about processing the child. (Baca & Cervantes, 1984). Marion (1982) described these parents as often feeling "desperate and confused" by the educational system in general and special education procedures in particular.

Due to the apparent need for additional information related to understanding the perceptions and concerns of parents of culturally diverse handicapped children, a study involving 12 families (6 Anglo and 6 Hispanic) that had children placed in special education classes was conducted in a southern New Mexico community. The purpose of the study was to examine parent perceptions about their children's performance at home and school, the role of the school in educating their children, and interactions with the educational system. The remainder of this paper will address the methodology used in the study, its results, and implications for future research and programming efforts.

METHODOLOGY

The study was initiated in several steps: selection of a location, formation of an interview guide, identification of families to

interview, conducting of interviews in the home, and the organization and interpretation of data.

Location

Because of its ethnic composition, and because of the large number of culturally diverse students placed in special education classes in its district, a community in southern New Mexico was selected as the site for research. In the district, which is located 50 miles from the Mexican border, nearly 50 percent of the children enrolled are Hispanic. Representation of Spanish-speaking children in special education programs is almost 80 percent. Bilingual education programs are available in only 2 out of 15 elementary schools. The study site was a university community, and its members are generally employed in agricultural, local, or small business endeavors, or are employed by the public school or college systems.

Development of the Interview Guide

Because it was the intent of the study to gather information based on the expression of feelings and beliefs about handicapping conditions and their implications, interviews were to be conducted in a nondirective, nonstandardized fashion. Guidelines for conducting interviews included the following:

1. Keep sessions informal.
2. Allow family members to express themselves openly and freely.
3. Spend approximately one hour with each family.
4. Audiotape all conversations.
5. Write personal observations notes after leaving the home.
6. Observe the sociological, linguistic, etc. environment of the home.
7. Remember that the goal of the interview is to better understand family perceptions and attitudes about their disabled child and to examine possible influences on the development of those feelings.

Although the interviewer was to be given no set questions to ask, she was instructed to cover certain major topic areas such as:

1. Age of child.
2. Grade, level, type of class of child.
3. Child's educational history.
4. Family members who live in the home.

5. Language spoken in the home.
6. Parents' interaction with the school.
7. Person at school parents most often contact.
8. Parents' description of the child's behavior at home.
9. Parents' description of the child's disability.
10. Age when problem was first noticed/diagnosed.
11. Places/persons parents have contacted for help.
12. Parents' ideas about cause of disability.
13. Child's relationship to other family members.
14. Child's interaction within community/neighborhood.
15. Parents' feelings about child's future.

Identification of Families to Interview

The general population to be addressed was parents of handicapped children. Because the study was descriptive (as opposed to experimental) in nature, nonprobability methods were used to select six Hispanic and six Anglo families who resided in the identified geographic area. Public school personnel (the Director of Special Education and school principals) were asked for recommendations on selecting participants. It was the intent of the researchers to identify families from various socioeconomic backgrounds with children of varying severities of handicap in the study. In addition, both parents, and where possible, siblings and extended family members were involved in data collection. A description of the families selected is included in Table 1.

Selection and Training of an Interviewer

The interviewer was selected on the bases of ethnicity, ability to speak the participant's language fluently, and on apparent interviewing ability. Training of the interviewer involved: reviewing and becoming familiar with the Interview Guide, discussing interview techniques and approach, and practicing the record-keeping procedures that would be used in the study. The interviewer selected was a Hispanic female, a former teacher who had been involved in previous qualitative research. She spent a total of six hours in being familiarized with the purpose of the study, the interview guidelines, and instructions for recording/transcribing the taped conversations.

Table 1

Description of Population Surveyed

	Ethnicity		Number of Children			Special Education Level[a]				Socioeconomic Status		
Family	Anglo	Hispanic	1-2	3-4	5+	A	B	C	D	Low	Middle	Upper
1		X			X			X			X	
2		X	X					X		X		
3		X	X						X	X		
4		X				X						
5		X					X			X		
6		X		X				X		X		
7	X			X			X			X		
8	X		X						X		X	
9	X		X				X				X	
10	X		X					X			X	
11	X		X						X		X	
12	X			X			X				X	

[a] A level involves the provision of services on an itinerant basis. B level is resource room service for 1 to 2 hours a day. C level requires that a child be in the special class at least 3 hours per day. D level serves more severe handicaps in one-half to full-day settings.

Conduct of On-Site Interviews

The interviewer was asked to conduct 12 one-hour interviews in the homes of identified families. Interviews were conducted in a nonstructured, nondirective fashion. In the nondirective interview, the initiative was basically taken by the respondent (Sellitz, Jahoda, Deutsch, & Cook, 1961). The interviewer, therefore, asked questions about topics included in the Interview Guide, but was instructed not to bias or direct the respondents to talk about their feelings and beliefs related to the handicapped child in the family. The interviewer was instructed to behave in a warm and permissive fashion, so that the participants would feel free to express themselves without fear of disapproval or dispute. The interviewer audiotaped all sessions on a cassette recorder. After each session, she additionally noted in writing descriptions of the home, family members involved in the interview, and other information that would provide a more accurate picture of the environment.

The Organization and Reporting of Data

The basic objective of reporting the data was to provide a rich description of parental perceptions of their handicapped children. Rogers (1984) referred to "thick description," implying it is the

wish of qualitative researchers to provide the "richest, fullest, most comprehensive" description possible for purposes of understanding a situation. Therefore, the interviewer provided the researchers with three types of data for descriptive purposes: recorded interviews, handwritten notes describing perceptions of the persons and environments involved, and oral discussions related to the interview experience.

An examination of the interview tapes, notes, and conversations resulted in the following summary of observations:

1. A majority of Hispanic families stated they did not understand much of the printed information that was sent home by the schools because it is written in English; report cards and IEPs were cited specifically.
2. When printed information was sent home in Spanish, several Hispanic families said that although they spoke and read the language, they did not comprehend technical terminology well.
3. A majority of Hispanic families often felt they should not question the decisions made by school personnel and frequently were not aware of the precise type of program their children attended.
4. Hispanic families stated they did not regularly involve themselves in school activities.
5. Hispanic families responded that the person they contacted most frequently about their children was the school principal.
6. Hispanic parents said they did not know why their children exhibited certain characteristics but tended to accept them as a part of their daily lives.
7. Hispanic families reported that they expected their children to perform designated chores and duties at home.
8. Anglo families could often label, although not describe, the type of special services their children were receiving.
9. Two Anglo families complained about some aspects of the organization of special services in the district. Specifically, they mentioned: noncategorical classrooms, multigrade level classrooms, and lack of communication between resource room and regular class personnel.
10. Several Anglo families reported having contacted several persons when seeking information about their children's progress. Specifically mentioned were the principal, nurse, teacher, and speech therapist.

11. Both Hispanic and Anglo families cited some difficulty in interpreting comprehending technical terminology presented at placement meetings and on printed information.
12. Both Hispanic and Anglo families felt children should be given more homework, although both groups admitted they could not always help the child with it.
13. Both Hispanic and Anglo families whose children were at B and C levels (of special education services) had a tendency to describe the children's problems but stated that they felt the child was not "abnormal" or "handicapped."
14. At B and C levels, both groups of parents stated they felt the child would "outgrow" their problems.
15. Only at the D level did parents apply a medical or educational term to the child's disability (Down Syndrome, hearing impairment, and trainable were used).
16. None of the parents could cite a definite cause for learning or behavior difficulties, although two parents described them as "una cosa de Dios" (God's will).
17. None of the parents expressed feelings of guilt or remorse.
18. Socioeconomic levels seemed to impact greatest on those families who felt certain apparatus or services that might be beneficial were unaffordable. (Hearing aids, medication, and special medical services were mentioned.)
19. Both groups at the B and C levels felt their children would be able to do whatever they wish as adults.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PROGRAMMING

Based on the observations generated by the interviews, it seems that the following areas may be possibilities for exploration:

1. Intelligibility of school's oral and written language. Are report cards and program plans written so they will be comprehended by all parents?
2. Formality of school meetings and activities.
   Are meeting times, places, and agenda set with parents' needs in mind?
3. The role of the school principal.
   Is the principal the person most likely to be contacted by parents, and if so, is he or she well informed about special education services?
4. Parental expectations for children at home.
   Do they differ significantly from expectations at school?

5. Discrepancy between parent and school perception of the "disability."
   Do parents, in fact, think of their children as handicapped?
6. Variance in the perception of the function of the school.
7. Do some parents believe it is the school's role, not theirs, to make educational decisions?

Whatever the focus of future studies, research reported in the literature and indications from the present study seem to point to the need for considering the perceptions of families of culturally diverse handicapped children as different from those of Anglo parents. Moreover, it seems that not only should the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of these families be considered as special, but their relationship to the school and its efforts at informing and communicating with them should be further explored.

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